9966

from the author.

A

VINDICATION

OF THE

PRINCIPLES upon which ſeveral UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS have formed themſelves into ſocieties, for the purpoſe of avowing and recommending their views of religious doctrine, by the diſtribution of books,

&c. &c.

BRITISH MUSEUM

A

VINDICATION

OF

THE PRINCIPLES

UPON WHICH

Several UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS have formed themſelves into Societies, for the purpoſe of avowing and recommending their Views of Religious Doctrine, by the Diſtribution of Books.

IN A LETTER TO —— ——.

BY JOHN KENTISH.

Every man who has judgment enough to form a religious opinion, ſhould have the uprightneſs to avow and ſupport it.

DYER's *Inquiry into Subſcription, &c.*

THE SECOND EDITION.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY J. DAVIS, CHANCERY-LANE;

AND SOLD BY J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD.

MDCCC.

BRITISH MUSEUM

PREFACE.

A FEW copies of the following Letter were printed at a country preſs in the year 1794 *; and obtained, agreeably to the deſign of the writer, and the occaſion of the pamphlet, a *local* circulation. But, the members of the Society to which it immediately related, having been pleaſed to call for a ſecond edition of the piece, from the hope that it will prove more extenſively uſeful, when read as "A Vindication of the Principles upon which Societies of this nature either already exiſt, or may with propriety be formed;" the author now gives it to the public, with this ſingle view, under a new title, and not without

* Under the title, "A Letter to —— —— on the late Correſpondence, &c.

variations and additions. *All* the names, and *ſome* of the alluſions, originally introduced, he has at preſent omitted; nor, indeed, have any of the latter been retained, excepting where ſuch a preſervation was deemed abſolutely eſſential to the accuracy of his ſtatements and the concluſiveneſs of his reaſoning. He has, alſo, gladly availed himſelf of this opportunity to correct, in many places, the language of his performance.

Unleſs he be a total ſtranger to the feelings of his breaſt, and the motives of his conduct, he may venture to affirm, that not with the unworthy deſire of wantonly inflicting pain, but only from a wiſh to advance what he moſt cordially values as the cauſe of religious truth and virtue, he engaged at firſt in the undertaking. He ſtill laments, that, whilſt he aſſerted this cauſe, it became neceſſary for him to animadvert, in ſome meaſure, upon the behaviour of an, otherwiſe reſpectable, individual: yet he judged, that

no

no conſiderations of this kind ought to reſtrain him from the exerciſe of *duty*. Concerning that behaviour he is unconſcious of having expreſſed himſelf in ſtronger terms than the circumſtances demanded. If, however, he have deceived himſelf in this perſuaſion; if, contrary to his intention and endeavour, he have written even a ſingle word in reference to it, which the law of Chriſtian love ought to have forbidden with effect; he deplores his want of candour or of judgment; and entreats his readers, that in eraſing ſuch word from the pages of his tract, they will blot it out, if poſſible, at the ſame time, from "the tablets of their hearts *."

* Si quid dixerim contra ſpiritum caritatis evangelicæ, indictum eſto.

Dec. 7th, 1799.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION.

IT is conceived, that the circumſtances which have occaſioned the following Letter, will be ſufficiently underſtood by a reference to the correſpondence between ——— and ———. This correſpondence, therefore, is here reprinted. It has been judged adviſeable likewiſe to annex the Declaration of the Society to which it relates; the nature and object of this Society being there ſtated, it is preſumed, with the greateſt explicitneſs and candour.

CORRESPONDENCE, &c.

No. I.

The Notice delivered at —— Meeting-houſe, — on Sunday, June 29, 1794.

" You are deſired to take notice, that Wedneſday next, being the day appointed for the Annual Meeting

ing of the Society of Unitarian Chriſtians, eſtabliſhed for promoting Chriſtian knowledge, and the practice of virtue, by the diſtribution of books, a Sermon will be preached on the occaſion in this place: the ſervice to begin at eleven o'clock."

No. II.

—— ——'s firſt Note.

" —— —— preſents his reſpectful compliments to the Rev. Mr. ——, and, as one of the truſtees for the —— meeting-houſe, would beg the favour of Mr. ——'s informing him whether he has had the permiſſion of the truſtees for giving the notice relating to the ſermon to be preached at that meeting-houſe next Wedneſday.

" Sunday noon, 29th June, 1794."

No. III.

Mr. ——'s firſt Note.

" —— ——'s reſpects wait on Mr. ——. He received the notice, which he read this morning, from Mr. ——, laſt evening, as what he himſelf intended to read had he officiated to day."

No. IV.

—— ——'s ſecond Note.

" Mr. —— is much obliged to Mr. —— for his information, and deſires, as one of the truſtees, that

that he will give notice to Mr. ——— immediately to contradict the notice given this morning at the —— meeting-houſe, this afternoon; Mr. —— intending to call a meeting of the truſtees to-morrow on the ſubject.

Sunday, 2 o'clock."

No. V.

Mr. ———'s ſecond Note.

" Mr. ——— will not have an opportunity to comply with Mr. ———'s requeſt, as Mr. ——— is at ———."

No. VI.

—— ——'s Letter to Mr. ——.

" Rev. Sir,

" Agreeable to the information which I had the pleaſure of giving you yeſterday, there has been a meeting of a majority of the truſtees of the —— meeting-houſe this afternoon, when the ſeveral papers which have paſſed between us relating to the notice of preaching the anniverſary ſermon of the Unitarian Society, were laid before them; and I am deſired to ſay, that they are unanimouſly of opinion that the houſe ſhould not be opened on the occaſion, and have given their directions accordingly.

I am,

Monday afternoon, June 30, 1794. Your moſt obedient ſervant, —— ——."

No. VII.

Note from the Truſtees and others of the —— Meeting-houſe.

" The truſtees and others of —— meeting preſent their reſpects to the Rev. Mr. ———, and requeſt that himſelf and his friends will make that uſe of the —— meeting-houſe on the morrow, which their anceſtors have been accuſtomed to glory in, viz. worſhipping the Great God, according to the dictates of their own conſciences.

" Tueſday, 4 o'clock—July 1, 1794."

No. VIII.

Extract from the Minutes of the Society of Unitarian Chriſtians.

" Reſolved, That the thanks of this Society be returned to the truſtees and other members of the —— meeting-houſe, for the very liberal and handſome manner in which they offered them the uſe of the houſe for the religious ſervice of this day."

Preamble to the Rules of the Society.

" THE Chriſtian Religion, deriving its origin from the immediate revelation of God, and being the ſcheme which infinite wiſdom has choſen as beſt calculated

calculated to lead men to virtue and happineſs, muſt be of the greateſt value to mankind. But as it operates upon the minds of thoſe who embrace it only by the excellence of its doctrines and inſtitutions, its utility is leſſened in proportion as theſe are corrupted. That chriſtianity has ſuffered great injury by the additions made to it, ſince the time of Chriſt and his Apoſtles, is readily allowed by all Proteſtants; and they have exerted themſelves with commendable zeal to remove them. To us it is equally evident that many errors are ſtill retained by Proteſtants themſelves, no leſs pernicious than thoſe which have been abandoned. To endeavour, therefore, to obtain a further reformation of religion, and to reſtore it to the ſtandard of original purity, muſt be regarded as a uſeful and benevolent undertaking, worthy of the zealous exertions of all thoſe who wiſh to promote the religious improvement and happineſs of the human race. It is to accompliſh this important purpoſe, in conjunction with others of the ſame ſentiments with ourſelves in other parts of the kingdom, that this Society is formed.

" Conſidering that one principal obſtruction to the progreſs of juſt ſentiments in religion, has ariſen from the want of an open avowal of them by thoſe by whom they have been embraced, or of other methods of making them known to the world, we have thought proper to aſſociate ourſelves together, in order to diſtribute among thoſe who are diſpoſed

to

to inquire, ſuch books as appear to us to contain the pureſt account of the doctrines of revelation, and to be beſt calculated to promote the intereſts of true piety and virtue, but more particularly among ſuch perſons as from their ſituation in life are precluded in a great meaſure from obtaining the means of information; declaring it to be the fundamental principle of the Society, in which we all agree, *that there is but one God, the Creator and Governor of the univerſe, without an equal or a vicegerent, the only object of religious worſhip; and that Jeſus Chriſt was the moſt eminent of thoſe meſſengers which he has employed to reveal his will to mankind, poſſeſſing extraordinary powers ſimilar to thoſe received by other prophets, but in a much higher degree.*

"While we thus declare our belief in the ſtrict unity of God, and cannot but regard every practice as idolatrous which attributes any of the prerogatives of the Deity to another, a concluſion in which we think ourſelves warranted by the language of ſcripture, we would not be underſtood to aſſert, that we think ſuch practices are attended with the ſame immoral conſequences as the idolatry which prevailed in the ancient heathen world. What they are, however, in *all* caſes injurious, and in *ſome* highly criminal, we have no doubt; but how far they may be ſo in any particular inſtance we pretend not to determine, as it muſt depend upon circumſtances which can be known only to the individuals concerned, and to that Being who ſearches their hearts.

"In laying down the above principles as the fundamental maxims of the Society, we do no more than exercise the authority which every society poſſeſſes, of determining the object for which they aſſociate, and to the promoting which they chooſe to limit their endeavours. No one can juſtly complain that he is injured or aggrieved thereby. If others ſhould think fit to form ſocieties for propagating ſuch views of the Chriſtian Religion as are different from thoſe we entertain, they have an undoubted right to do ſo, and they will not be cenſured by us; for we admit in the moſt unreſtrained ſenſe, the right of every man to think for himſelf in matters of religion, and apprehend that this right extends to judging of the importance of opinions as well as of the truth of them. We wiſh not to prevent the diſcuſſion of what we deem the genuine principles of chriſtianity, but to procure for them an impartial and candid examination: by this means we truſt that the truth will at length prevail, and the welfare of the human race be greatly advanced."

A LETTER,

5 0C59

A

LETTER, &c.

SIR,

IT was not perhaps your intention, or your wiſh, that certain communications which you lately made to Mr. ——— ſhould be laid before the public. The members of the ſociety to which they refer have judged proper, nevertheleſs, to give them, if poſſible, a general circulation. This they have done, in order to inform their neighbours, and their countrymen, that, no cauſe being aſſigned, no crime being imputed, they have been forbidden to aſſemble in a diſſenting meeting-houſe—forbidden to uſe it ſimply for a purpoſe "which their anceſtors have been accuſtomed to glory in, that of worſhipping the Great God, according to the dictates of their own conſciences*."

* See Correſpondence, &c. No. VII.

In this prohibition, Sir, you concurred. With you, in truth, it ſeems to have originated. It was you who had *the pleaſure* of informing Mr. ——, that ſuch a ſtep was in contemplation; and, when it was actually reſolved upon, you had the farther *pleaſure* of communicating this intelligence to the ſame gentleman *. Be not ſurpriſed, then, that I now addreſs myſelf to *you*. Of thoſe, indeed, who voted with you upon the above occaſion I have no knowledge; but to your name, perſon, and character, I am not altogether a ſtranger. You, Sir, I have been accuſtomed to think, are well able to give a reaſon for your conduct: yet, how does it happen that, in the caſe before us, you have ſtated none? The information which you convey, the reſolution which you ſignify, is unaccompanied by any explanation. What, let me aſk, are we to conclude from this ſilence? It is not, ſurely, honourable to yourſelf: it is not fair and candid with regard to the ſociety of which I have the happineſs to be a member.

* Correſpondence, &c. Nos. IV. and VI.

Whether,

Whether, upon the ſubject in queſtion, you did not exceed your province as *one of the truſtees for the* ———, it were uſeleſs to inquire. The power which you claimed and exerciſed is not, I believe, generally underſtood to be your legal right. I imagine, that the property of the meeting-houſe is veſted in your hands, not for any purpoſes of your own, but for a determinate and ſpecific object. You hold it, as appears to me, for the uſe of miniſters regularly choſen by the ſubſcribers. Theſe miniſters are elected, I conceive, to perform religious worſhip, and to deliver religious inſtruction, whenever they may themſelves think proper, or when any perſons are inclined to attend them. If your deed of truſt reſemble the inſtruments which are employed for the ſecurity of other diſſenting chapels, ſuch is its nature—ſuch, undoubtedly, its end. Now, what was the purport of the public notice which Mr. ——— read at ———, and which he received from one of the miniſters who had been thus choſen? It merely ſtated, that a ſermon would be preached in that place, on the day appointed for the annual meeting of the ſociety of Unitarian Chriſ-

tians *. All which it ſignified was, that a religious ſervice would be performed there at a particular time. It had the ſanction likewiſe of one of the regular miniſters †. Your interference with that miniſter, therefore, in this appointment, was in direct oppoſition, I preſume, to the nature of your truſt. Should you plead that "the perſon nominated to officiate on the above day was a ſtranger, and not one of the miniſters belonging to the congregation," this, I preſume, would make no difference in the queſtion. According to my views of the ſubject, the right of aſking ſtrangers to preach occaſionally, is the right of the miniſter himſelf, and not of the truſtees: it is not to them excluſively, but to the congregation at large, that he is amenable, if he abuſe this right. Neither can you object with juſtice, that "the notice given upon this occaſion intimated a deſign of admitting ſtrangers;" and ſuch, unqueſtionably, were moſt of the perſons compoſing the Unitarian Society. You need not be told, Sir, that all places of

* Correſpondence, &c. No. I.

† Correſpondence, &c. No. III.

public

public worſhip are neceſſarily acceſſible to ſtrangers of every deſcription, by the ſame legal authority under which they continue to be opened. The only ſtrangers whom you are empowered to exclude, are thoſe who claim the right of uſing your chapel in oppoſition to the miniſters regularly choſen, or to the ſubſcribers who uſually aſſemble in it. A ſtranger may occupy the pulpit, provided he obtain the leave of one of the ſettled miniſters; and ſtrangers who meet to hear him are countenanced and protected by the law. I cannot avoid being of opinion, then, that you and your coadjutors have lately done more than was authorized by the terms and intention of your truſt. With ——, however, I am not qualified to conteſt this point. I am neither concerned nor diſpoſed, moreover, to proceed in the inveſtigation of it; and I cheerfully leave it to be examined by thoſe who are intereſted in the deciſion.

But allowing that you are legally poſſeſſed of this prerogative, ſtill it was our wiſh to have known from yourſelf, why it is now rouſed from its peaceful ſlumbers, and

called into exerciſe. You owed, Sir, to your own character, an ingenuous ſtatement of your motives: for it could hardly be your deſire, that we ſhould ſuſpect you of acting from conſiderations which you are aſhamed or afraid to diſcloſe. In juſtice alſo to the ſociety, the grounds of your oppoſition ought to have been diſtinctly aſſigned. Our ſentiments, or our conduct, muſt, in your opinion, be exceedingly obnoxious, ſince you would not ſuffer the meeting-houſe of which you are a truſtee to be opened for our admiſſion. Now, is it not highly injurious thus to arraign and condemn us, whilſt you offer no proof of our demerit? Sir, if you can find ſuch proof, let it be inſtantly produced. We are not, I truſt, unprepared for our defence, ſhould defence be neceſſary. The impartial public will judge between us.

It may be, that local circumſtances occaſioned, in part, our excluſion from —— meeting-houſe. This excluſion, poſſibly, might likewiſe proceed from a miſapprehenſion of our principles and views as Unitarians. But whatever motives influenced yourſelf and your aſſociates,

aſſociates, your proceedings do not appear to be approved by many of the diſſenters in ——. To a large proportion of the number, I may ſafely affirm, it is the ſubject of ſincere and deep regret, that we were thus prevented from aſſembling for religious ſervice, agreeably to the notice given by Mr. ——. Of the temper by which ſome of them in particular are actuated, we have a pleaſing indication in the note received from the truſtees and others of the ————; a note which breathes the pure ſpirit of chriſtian liberality, and which far exceeds all the praiſe that I am able to beſtow. Amongſt the regular attendants at that place of worſhip, there are few, I learn, who have embraced the Unitarian doctrine. They know, however, that perfect unanimity of ſentiment is not requiſite to an union in evangelical benevolence; and in this perſuaſion they have behaved with a kindneſs and friendſhip which reflect upon them the moſt genuine honour.

You might probably conceive, Sir, that, *for the uſe of* ——— *meeting-houſe, application ſhould have been made to the truſtees. As no ſuch requeſt was preſented to you, the exerciſe of*

*your authority might be thought nothing more than a ſeaſonable aſſertion of your privilege, and the juſt puniſhment of our neglect**. But, not to obſerve that your rightful poſſeſſion of this privilege is extremely doubtful, you muſt admit that cuſtom and precedent are entirely againſt you. To ſolicit "the permiſſion of the truſtees" for giving notice relative to an occaſional ſermon intended to be preached in a diſſenting chapel, is a thing unheard of amongſt us. This being the caſe, no diſreſpect could be implied in our ſilence; and no reaſonable perſon can be of opinion that diſreſpect was meant. Even could I grant that we were miſtaken, it muſt be acknowledged, however, that you ſhould have treated our error with leſs harſhneſs and with greater candour.

* I perceive, that the reviewer in the Gentleman's Magazine for Auguſt 1794, ſpeaks of the truſtees as really influenced by this motive, in their refuſal of ——— meeting-houſe. The ſources from which he derives his intelligence, are, perhaps, of a private nature. If this be the caſe, I am not permitted to queſtion their authenticity. I have only to expreſs a wiſh, that the motive had been avowed by Mr. ——— and his friends in a manner leſs ambiguous and indirect.

But

But farther; *Individuals belonging to our ſociety you, perhaps, diſlike.* It is at leaſt poſſible, that ſome degree of perſonal averſion might contribute its influence upon the preſent occaſion. Yet it ought not, ſurely, to have been thus expreſſed. And it is the dictate of common juſtice, that a body of men ſhould not be involved in the ſuppoſed demerits of ſingle members.

Could I think, however, that your recent behaviour had its origin ſolely in circumſtances of a private nature, I would not trouble you with this public addreſs. Theſe circumſtances, indeed, might have their weight; but I am much deceived, Sir, if you were not principally governed by conſiderations which apply to us in general as Unitarians. I am happy, therefore, in the opportunity hence afforded me, of making a few obſervations upon the motives from which we have formed ourſelves into a ſociety; at the ſame time that I gladly take this occaſion of vindicating our characters againſt ſome popular calumnies, which are induſtriouſly ſpread by the intereſted, and readily believed by the ignorant.

It is not improbable that *you may eſteem our exiſtence, and our interviews, as a ſociety, altogether unneceſſary.* Of ſuch neceſſity, however, you muſt permit us to judge rather from our own convictions, than from what may be thought or ſaid by others. Here we aſk nothing but what we cheerfully grant. Let us ſuppoſe that a number of gentlemen peaceably aſſociate in order to advance the ſtudy of natural hiſtory, as taught by the moſt approved philoſophers: what opinion would you entertain of him who attempted to obſtruct their labours, and to prevent their meetings, from the plea that there ſubſiſted no neceſſity for either? You would not fail to condemn his interference; you would not heſitate to declare, "although this perſon be ſtrictly juſtified in declining to join the ſociety, yet his interruption of it is indefenſible." Such, undoubtedly, Sir, would be your concluſion; and to yourſelf I leave the application.

But it is of little conſequence, you will ſay, *to what articles of faith men ſubſcribe, provided they be honeſt and ſincere: ſo that for your zeal and earneſtneſs reſpecting points of doctrine there is no reaſonable occaſion.* Such, nevertheleſs,

we freely acknowledge, is not our language. Far be it from us, indeed, to regard our diſtinguiſhing tenets as eſſential to ſalvation. Yet we think highly of their importance; and to the importance, as well as the truth of them, the right of private judgment certainly extends. Hence we deem it our indiſpenſible duty to diffuſe, as widely and effectually as poſſible, thoſe views of the Chriſtian revelation which we believe to be juſt and ſcriptural. Some may deride; others may unhandſomely oppoſe; there are thoſe who may threaten and injure us. But we ſtill conſider ourſelves as under the ſtrongeſt obligation to confeſs our Divine Maſter "before men," and not to be aſhamed of him, or of his words. The dictates of our underſtandings and conſciences muſt alone determine our conduct. "Let every man be fully perſuaded in his own mind;" but let him not diſturb another in the exerciſe of his Chriſtian liberty: this were to violate the memorable rule of equity, "Whatſoever ye would that men ſhould do to you, do ye even ſo to them."

For myſelf, Sir, I am ſo far from looking upon religious truth as of trifling moment,

that I think it unſpeakably more valuable than any other kind of truth. In all endeavours to inveſtigate and promote it, I cordially rejoice. I honour the ſerious Chriſtian, of whatever denomination, who thus employs his time and his abilities. To me it appears one amongſt our firſt duties, to bear teſtimony to it in the moſt public and explicit manner. I ſay this, from a firm conviction, that the principles of religion are eminently adapted to advance the greateſt happineſs of man in every ſtage of his exiſtence. You, alſo, believe in Chriſtianity, and will not, ſurely, diſpute the juſtneſs of the aſſertion. Why, indeed, do we ſpeak of the goſpel as an ineſtimable bleſſing to the world, but on account of its tendency to reform the hearts and lives of men, by enlightening them with information upon thoſe ſubjects in which their deareſt intereſts are concerned? It may be added, that the period when Chriſtian truth was profeſſed in the pureſt ſtate, was likewiſe the period when Chriſtian virtue moſt flouriſhed. Error and ſuperſtition have uſually been fruitful ſources of vice. Our religion cannot exert its full influence upon the moral cha-

racter,

racter, if its real doctrines be disregarded, or if false ones be mixed with what are genuine. In our attempts, therefore, to bring others to a knowledge of the truth, we are sufficiently justified, as well by the importance of the object, as by the precepts and example of Jesus Christ, our illustrious "forerunner *."

Were Christianity, indeed, a fable and a dream, we might not be thus solicitous to preserve it "pure and undefiled." If the fundamental principle of our society were not peculiarly momentous; if the evils which have followed a departure from the absolute unity of God were few and inconsiderable; if the infringement of this grand truth had not given rise to polytheism and idolatry; if it had not served to expose our religion to contempt, to destroy its simplicity, to deform its beauty, to check its progress, to oppose its efficacy; we might not think our exertions so highly requisite. In this case, we might satisfy ourselves with the concealment, or the disguise, of our sentiments. We might be contented to sacrifice them at the shrine of

* Hebrews, ch. vi. ver. 20.

intereſt, popularity and faſhion. But if it be true that effects of the moſt lamentable nature have reſulted from the groſs errors which we are deſirous of counteracting, our conduct muſt unavoidably be different. You, Sir, are not ignorant that ſuch effects have really taken place; and you cannot pretend that our labours are unneceſſary.

To theſe labours, again, *you cannot object, that they have no relation to the end propoſed.* In the words of our printed declaration, "we have thought proper to aſſociate ourſelves together, in order to diſtribute among thoſe who are diſpoſed to inquire, ſuch books as appear to us to contain the pureſt account of the doctrines of revelation, and to be the beſt calculated to promote the intereſts of true piety and virtue." This we judge to be the moſt adviſeable method of diffuſing our ſentiments: for, by means of the preſs, truth may be advanced with moſt calmneſs, and therefore with the beſt proſpect of ſucceſs. And ſince many writings are in circulation, the deſign and tendency of which we cannot approve; to diſtribute books of a contrary deſcription

tion is a fair and honourable mode of oppoſition.

But the peruſal of controverſial books, you may remark, *cannot be uſeful*. I obſerve, in anſwer, that, however ſome perſons deſpiſe and cenſure controverſy, we are indebted to it for the moſt ſolid benefits. Its evils have been temporary and partial; its advantages, laſting and univerſal. What are ſtyled its evils, indeed, have proceeded chiefly from the furious temper with which it has too frequently been exerciſed. But it certainly may be conducted, and, upon ſome occaſions, has, in fact, been conducted, with a ſpirit of candour and benevolence. In reality, if truth be important, controverſy is neceſſary and important; for by diſcuſſion and reaſoning alone can truth be elucidated, defended and promoted. Hiſtory atteſts the mighty influence of opinion upon human affairs; and it farther atteſts the folly and impolicy of preventing a free and impartial examination of opinion. The moſt intereſting events in the annals of mankind have been accompliſhed, not ſo much by external force, as by the unconfined exertion of the intellectual faculties. Had it not, Sir, been for inquiry and

contro-

controverſy, our releaſe from the bondage of heatheniſm and popery, in particular, would never have been effected; and the purity of Chriſtian truth, I may venture to aſſert, can only by the ſame means be guarded and improved.

There are, I know, thoſe who, with a ſuſpicious clamour, decry controverſy. They always uſe the word in an unfavourable ſenſe; condemning, under the obnoxious epithets *polemical* and *controverſial*, the moſt important diſcuſſions in which the minds of men can poſſibly be engaged. Perſons of ſenſe and reflection, however, will not haſtily reprobate thoſe labours in which the beſt and wiſeſt of our race have toiled. What, Sir, were Newton, Locke, and Hartley; what were Clarke and Hoadly, but controverſial writers? Every author who attacks prevailing error, and oppoſes the miſtaken notions of his predeceſſors or contemporaries, is a controverſial writer. But controverſy is ſo far from being uſeleſs or diſgraceful, that, when employed upon intereſting topics, and conducted with candour and diſcretion, it is in the higheſt degree honourable and advantageous.

The

The intricacies of ſchool-divinity, the nice refinements and the diſtinguiſhing phraſeology of theological ſyſtems, have no place in the books which we recommend and circu'ate. It is the ſimple object of theſe publications to convince men, that "there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Chriſt Jeſus;" and farther to teach them, that "this is life eternal to know Jehovah to be the only true God, and Jeſus to be the Chriſt whom he has ſent." In theſe publications there is nothing contradictory and unintelligible, nothing to perplex the underſtanding of the reader, to diſtract his feelings, to caſt a gloom on his accuſtomed cheerfulneſs, or to call forth his angry paſſions. The evils, therefore, which, juſtly or unjuſtly, have been imputed to controverſial writings, cannot be charged upon thoſe which our ſociety diſperſes. We conceive, that the beſt way of deſtroying error is to avow and diffuſe truth. The ſubject to which we ſolicit the attention of our fellow-chriſtians, is confeſſedly important; nor can it, with reaſon, be alleged, that the means employed are unſuitable or inſufficient.

But you may aſk, *granting that it be proper*

to diſtribute books with the view of ſpreading a belief in the divine unity, why might not you have contented yourſelves, as individuals, with the more private circulation of theſe books in your reſpective neighbourhoods? Such is the language which I once heard. The opinion conveyed by it may probably be yours. To ourſelves, however, it ſeems that our *public aſſociation*, as Unitarian Chriſtians, is peculiarly deſirable. More can be done by a ſociety, than by the unaſſiſted efforts of individual perſons; the countenance of others cheers and animates us in the proſecution of our undertaking; our interviews and co-operation are well calculated to increaſe our mutual benevolence; and our teſtimony to what we regard as the cauſe of truth, is thus more direct and undiſguiſed. Why, too, ſhould not the world know that there are perſons who feel an ardent concern for the intereſts of primitive and genuine Chriſtianity? Curioſity will hence be in ſome degree awakened; and curioſity, we may hope, will terminate in conviction.

It has been objected, again, that *a public aſſociation for the avowal and diffuſion of religious opinions, will give to thoſe opinions a foreign*

and

and undue ſupport. I readily allow, Sir, that no conſideration ſhould lead us to embrace any ſentiments, whether they relate to religion, or to other topics, beſide a perſuaſion of their truth. It muſt further be granted, that we ſhall feel no common diſappointment, if the very meaſure which we adopt with the view of inducing mankind to inveſtigate and decide for themſelves, have the contrary effect. However, if the objection be applicable to religion, it is applicable likewiſe to every ſubject in which *opinion* is concerned. Upon this principle, then, perſons whoſe ſituations and characters are reſpectable, ſhould not appear in thoſe places of worſhip, where the ſervice is conducted agreeably to their own ideas; ſince it is at leaſt a poſſible caſe, that their neighbours may hence be ſeduced into an unreaſonable partiality for thoſe ſentiments of the Chriſtian doctrine, which ſuch perſons entertain and profeſs. Neither, upon this ground, ſhould they *publicly* teſtify their approbation of an hoſpital, a charity ſchool, or other ſimilar inſtitutions. Here alſo, their learning, their talents, or their virtues, may unjuſtly influence the opinions and the actions of thoſe

around them. In ſhort, if we purſue the argument to its proper conſequences, we ſhall find that it ſtrongly oppoſes the laudable and uſeful inclination which almoſt every man feels to act in concert with his fellow-creatures. It is certainly the wiſh of our ſociety, to procure the attention of men to the important truths which are ſtated in our declaration. But it cannot with juſtice or candour be ſaid, that they will be biaſſed in favour of theſe truths, by our perſonal or collective influence. We have neither the ability nor the deſire to awe by power, to dazzle by honours, or to bribe by riches. Intellectual and moral attainments are not confined to us; and even if they were, ſtill, in the preſent ſtate of ſociety, they have comparatively few and inconſiderable attractions for the world in general. The bulk of mankind are far more ſtrongly ſwayed by external circumſtances. When they perceive, indeed, that doctrines commonly eſteemed falſe and dangerous are maintained by ſome amongſt the wiſe and good, their prejudice againſt ſuch doctrines may in a certain degree be removed. Our public aſſociation, perhaps, may thus aſſiſt the

the progreſs of the Unitarian principles; and it will not be an unnatural, an unfair, or a diſhonourable aſſiſtance. But intereſt and ambition, notwithſtanding, will prevail for the moment. Theſe and other kindred qualities are leagued againſt the cauſe of truth. It may ſurely, therefore, be permitted us to counteract their effects, by the union and the exerciſe of better qualities. If we may judge from fact, there is ſmall probability that our diſtinguiſhing tenets will owe their advancement to an extrinſic aid which is not congenial with their nature. We cannot, we wiſh not to diffuſe them in any other way than in the ſimple and fearleſs manifeſtation of their exact conformity with reaſon and with ſcripture.

If it be ſaid, *As friends to the right of private judgment, and the exerciſe of impartial and free inquiry, you ought to circulate not only thoſe books which are written in favour of your religious ſentiments, but ſuch likewiſe as are drawn up profeſſedly in oppoſition to them*; I reply, neither is this meaſure neceſſary to be purſued by our ſociety, nor is it required from us as conſiſtent Proteſtants. In controverſial pieces,

pieces, on whatever ſide, principles which are attacked, arguments which are diſputed, cannot well be concealed from the knowledge of the reader. Beſide which, it may naturally be ſuppoſed, that where Chriſtians admit the truth, and feel the importance, of their diſtinguiſhing opinions, they will generally combat zeal by zeal, nor fail to diſtribute tracts with the expreſs view of ſpreading abroad the ſentiments which they reſpectively embrace. So that by this method all denominations may jointly encourage the diſcuſſion of religious doctrines; whilſt, however, each preſerves itſelf from "even the appearance" of hypocriſy on the one hand, or of indifference on the other.

With the hiſtory of Unitarianiſm in this country, Sir, you are not, perhaps, unacquainted. Now, it may ſafely be preſumed, that had thoſe of its friends who lived about the end of the laſt century, continued to maintain a diſtinct ſociety, for the purpoſe of avowing and diffuſing their ſentiments, Chriſtian truth would by this time have been more generally known and profeſſed *. Since it has

* See Toulmin's Life of Biddle, p. 68.

been

been courageouſly declared in the face of day, it has no doubt ſpread with greater rapidity, than when it reſembled "a light placed beneath a buſhel." But it has ſuffered by nothing ſo much as by the reluctance of its votaries to exhibit it in all its luſtre, before the eyes of their fellow-chriſtians.

Yet it may be pleaded by you, that *the meeting of the ſociety, if not unneceſſary, was at leaſt inexpedient.* If, however, you were convinced that it was improper we ſhould aſſemble, why did not you ſtate to us the reaſons of your conviction? For ſuch a communication you would have been entitled to our thanks.

Conſiderations of expediency and prudence, we would not, Sir, be underſtood to deſpiſe, when they do not interfere with acknowledged duty. But it yet remains to be proved that our deſign to aſſemble in the chapel of which you are a truſtee, was a violation of either. It has not hitherto been ſhewn that we infringed upon the one or the other, when we accepted a moſt generous and unſolicited invitation to meet elſewhere. The words *expediency* and *prudence*, indeed, have different

ferent ſenſes, as they are uſed by different perſons. Some men have the faculty of being more eaſily alarmed than others; and ſome may call that conduct inexpedient and imprudent, which to their leſs informed, or leſs fearful, neighbours appears perfectly innocent.

But in what reſpects, Sir, let me now aſk you, was our meeting improper? *Becauſe it might tend to excite prejudice and religious animoſity?* If this objection be valid, nothing ſhould ever be ſaid, nothing ſhould ever be written, with the view of ſubduing error and of advancing truth: for perſons will always be found, whom attempts of this nature offend and irritate. Should this conſideration be allowed its force, the freedom of the preſs ought inſtantly to be limited; and the works of thoſe who are deſervedly regarded as the greateſt benefactors of mankind ſhould be prevented from circulation. Nothing, however, which is juſt and important, nothing which is an object of duty, ought to be abandoned, merely from the probability that there are thoſe to whom it is obnoxious. In the purſuit of a worthy and momentous object we ſhould perſevere with ſtedfaſtneſs;

exerciſing,

exerciſing, at the ſame time, a ſpirit of candour and benevolence toward thoſe from whom we differ.

If, with ſuch a ſpirit, thoſe Chriſtians who moſt diſlike our religious ſentiments aſſociate to diffuſe their own, we ſhall not be offended. We ſhall rejoice, on the contrary, in the proſpect hence afforded us, that divine truth will the more ſpeedily prevail, and the more firmly be eſtabliſhed. Nor ſhall we indulge any reſentment, ſhould the members of this ſociety meet annually for religious worſhip. We ſhall even be truly glad to accommodate them with the uſe of our chapels, if, like ourſelves, they are excluded from one in which it was their intention to have aſſembled.

In the eye of reaſon, Sir, we can offend no deſcription of our fellow Chriſtians by our peaceful efforts. But if any be ſo unjuſt as to be angry upon the occaſion, we cannot ſacrifice our own convictions and feelings to their prejudices. Such a ſacrifice is not enjoined, nay, is expreſsly prohibited, by our common faith. Although we affect not

to undervalue the good opinion of mankind, yet it certainly ſhould be our firſt ſtudy to ſhew ourſelves approved unto God. Upon ſubjects of ſmall importance, we might be vindicated in yielding to the ſentiments of others; whereas in the affairs of religion there is no room for ſuch accommodation.

It may be thought, however, *that we ſhould better conciliate the affections of our neighbours by a gradual and partial diſcloſure of our religious opinions.* To this allegation I reply, that, believing theſe opinions to be true and important, we could not juſtify ourſelves in the concealment of them, even in part, from our fellow men. According to our views, Chriſtianity is no intricate and complex ſyſtem, which cannot be at once taught and comprehended. Its doctrines are few and ſimple; nor can the wiſe and good be offended with the moſt undiſguiſed profeſſion of them, if made "with meekneſs and fear." In ſhunning to declare "the whole counſel of God," moreover, we ſhould be condemned by the example of our Lord and his apoſtles. Truth, Sir, requires only to be known and avowed,

avowed, in order to be at length univerſally received; and facts ſhew, that it has been eſſentially injured by a temporizing ſpirit.

Some, too, may ſuppoſe, *that the times are unfavourable to the explicit declaration of our ſentiments.* It may be ſaid, that *the minds of men are fully occupied by other ſubjects, and are by no means friendly to religious ſpeculation.* Now, to aſſertion, Sir, aſſertion may properly be oppoſed. I cannot heſitate to affirm, that the explicit declaration of divine truth is in all ſeaſons a duty. The conſequences of it we cannot foreſee, and ought not to regard. In the preſent ſtate of things, religious ſpeculation may in ſome degree be unfaſhionable: but there are, doubtleſs, many perſons whom it highly intereſts; and it can never be unfit to call the public attention to topics of the firſt importance. Beſide, infidelity is thought to be increaſing; and infidelity, perhaps, ariſes, for the moſt part, from miſtaken apprehenſions concerning the nature of Chriſtianity: ſo that it peculiarly becomes us, by the profeſſion of our religion in what we conceive to be its pureſt ſtate, to check, if poſſible, the progreſs of unbelief.

I am informed, Sir, that *there are perſons who cenſure us, becauſe we aſſume excluſively the name of Unitarians.* So obvious, ſo important, is the doctrine of the divine unity, that the denial of it is diſclaimed by all Chriſtians, although it has long been forgotten by the majority! For, can they be called *Unitarians*, who addreſs their prayers to three diſtinct perſons? Or have they a claim to the appellation, who not only worſhip the Supreme Being, but offer religious adoration alſo to a creature, and aſcribe to that creature the perfections of divinity? The term is manifeſtly expreſſive of our peculiar ſentiments; and has the farther advantage of not implying an attachment to a leader.

You will not be ſurpriſed or offended, Sir, that I ſpeak of Jeſus Chriſt as *a creature.* In this light, I conceive, the New Teſtament uniformly repreſents him: it plainly deſcribes him as having received from God his exiſtence and his powers, and as equally dependent with ourſelves upon that Great Being who is the parent of him and of all mankind. I muſt add, that the ſcriptures point him out to me ſimply as a *human* creature. As ſuch, I find, he was foretold to the Jews; in conſequence

quence of which prediction, although they expected him to appear as a mighty conqueror and monarch, yet they never ſuppoſed, that he would be more than man. My faith in the doctrine of our Lord's proper humanity is conſiderably ſtrengthened, when I obſerve that his hiſtory, delivered to us by the evangeliſts, is the hiſtory, not of a God, not of an angelic and pre-exiſtent ſpirit, but of one who in all reſpects was like unto ourſelves, excepting, indeed, that he was diſtinguiſhed by extraordinary and divine communications. He was born, he lived, he ſpoke, he acted, he was tempted, like other men. His bodily frame, his mental conſtitution, was that of a man. Like the reſt of our race, he was ſubject to hunger and thirſt, to pain and fatigue, to ſuffering and death. To his diſciples, and to others, he always ſpeaks of himſelf as being a man; and never do they ſeem to have indulged the thought, that he was of higher rank. Had he been ſomething more, he would not, ſurely, have with-holden the information from his immediate followers; and it is impoſſible that they ſhould not have mentioned him un-

der his true denomination. When, however, I look into their writings, I diſcern no expreſſion which leads me to conceive, that they had any other idea of their honoured maſter, than that of "a man approved of God by miracles, and wonders, and ſigns, which God did by him." In their diſcourſes and their epiſtles, in paſſages too numerous to be here produced, and in terms as clear and expreſs as language can furniſh, they declare him to have been a man. They build upon this important truth ſome momentous arguments, and deduce from it ſome ſtriking practical exhortations. One of them, in particular, ſtates the reſurrection of Chriſt to be the pattern and the aſſurance of ours, becauſe it was the reſurrection of a man*: ſo that, if the doctrine be not ſtrictly agreeable to fact, his reaſoning is evidently inconcluſive. It is my conviction likewiſe, that the real humanity of Jeſus gives to his example all the force and perſuaſion which it poſſeſſes, all the conſolation which it adminiſters; whilſt it imparts to the proſpects of Chriſtians peculiar dignity and animation. Hence I reflect

* 1 Cor. xv. 21.

with

with additional confidence and pleaſure, that "becauſe he lives, we" whom he calls his brethren "ſhall live alſo;" hence I meditate with more ſolid delight on the conſideration, that he has aſcended "unto his Father and our Father, to his God and our God;" and hence I more gratefully admire the wiſdom and goodneſs of the Almighty in ordaining "the *man* Chriſt Jeſus" to judge the world. Finally; when I read the New Teſtament, I cannot avoid noticing that the honour and glory which our Lord now enjoys, are there ſaid to be ſolely the reward of his labours and ſufferings on earth *; an aſſertion this which is abſolutely inconſiſtent with his ſuppoſed divinity or pre exiſtence.

At the ſame time, Sir, I am not ignorant, that by the advocates for theſe doctrines many texts are brought forward in their ſupport. It muſt be allowed, however, that the general tenor of the ſcriptures is clearly deciſive as to the proper unity of God, and the real humanity of Chriſt. Few are the paſſages which may ſeem to have a contrary meaning. Examine them by the rules of fair criticiſm and interpretation, and they will not

* Philip. ii. 8, 9.

be found irreconcileable with theſe grand and leading truths *. To ſtate and to defend the evidence for our principles, is one great purpoſe of our ſociety. They who differ from us have perfect liberty to act the ſame part, with regard to the tenets which themſelves maintain; and we ſhall willingly commit the reſult to the inquiries of ſerious and impartial perſons.

But *the nature and object of our meeting*, you might think, *were liable to be groſsly miſtaken and miſrepreſented.* And what conduct, what proceedings, Sir, are not expoſed to the ſame misfortune?

* Texts which are pronounced concluſive for our Lord's pre-exiſtence and deity ought to be compared with ſimilar expreſſions uſed by the ſame ſpeaker, or writer, upon the ſame, or a like, occaſion. For example; if I wiſh to know what Chriſt means when he prays (John xvii. 5.) that he might be glorified with *the glory which he had with his Father before the world was*, I learn from verſes 22d and 24th of the chapter, that it was *a glory deſigned for him by* the gracious being who loved him *before the foundation of the world*, that it was a glory communicable to his diſciples, and that he ſpeaks of it as given by him to them. Hence, and from John xii. 23, amongſt other places, I infer, that this glory was the privilege of ſeeing his religion to be in ſome degree ſucceſsful and efficacious: and it is deſcribed as *given* to him and his followers, becauſe they were at preſent

misfortune? Our experience teaches us, I grant, that the principles and views which we entertain as Unitarians, are ſpoken of in terms the moſt erroneous and unjuſt. "All manner of evil" is ſaid againſt us falſely; but we have learnt, I hope, not to be diſcouraged or terrified by this conſideration. We are perſuaded, that to thoſe who ſeek occaſion to reproach us, we have afforded no ſuch occaſion. The miſtakes of honeſt men upon the ſubject we could wiſh to rectify; but we

ſent almoſt in the actual poſſeſſion of it. Again; I am inſtructed by John xvii. 18, that when Jeſus ſpeaks of himſelf, or is repreſented by any writers of the New Teſtament, as *ſent into the world*, this does not imply a literal and local deſcent from heaven, but only his divine commiſſion. For he here declares, "as thou haſt ſent me into the world, even ſo have I alſo ſent them (*i. e.* my diſciples) into the world." Once more; I am taught by verſes 21ſt and 22d of this chapter, that the union which is mentioned as ſubſiſting between God and Jeſus Chriſt, is an union which may ſubſiſt alſo between God and Chriſt and Chriſt's true diſciples; an union, that is, of benevolent intention in favour of the ſalvation and happineſs of mankind. I can truly affirm, that I was led to embrace the doctrine of Chriſt's ſimple humanity, by a peruſal of the New Teſtament, with a ſtrict regard to the connection and agreement of the ſeveral controverted paſſages.

ſhall not hence be induced to depart from the line of conduct which we have thought proper to adopt. We ſhould incur the guilt of indulging that fear of man which "bringeth a ſnare;" we ſhould virtually deny Chriſt before men; did we ſhrink from what we conceive to be our duty, becauſe our views are open to miſapprehenſion. If our object as a ſociety were different from our avowed deſign, hardly ſhould we chooſe to meet in public, and thus invite the attention of the world. In making a fair and ingenuous ſtatement of this object, we have done all within our power to prevent miſrepreſentation.

Our meeting, however, you might perhaps imagine, *would bring danger upon ourſelves, and upon thoſe with whom we are immediately or remotely connected.* For ſuch an apprehenſion, Sir, there could be no proper foundation; although I am inclined to believe that it might be entertained by yourſelf and your aſſociates. Yet, ſurely, your excluſion of us from ——— meeting houſe, was on this very ground exceedingly injudicious; ſince it tended to expoſe us to real danger, and to point us out as objects of jealouſy and ſuſpicion to the ignorant

rant and lawleſs. Now, if, in conſequence of this meaſure, we had experienced the effects of popular violence, it is impoſſible to ſay where the miſchief might have ended. You, and your friends, might have ſhared in the evils of which you would have been, in truth, the unintentional authors. It would have been the better policy, undoubtedly, to have preſerved ſilence upon the ſubject, and to have permitted us to aſſemble in peace agreeably to our wiſhes. A report of what had paſſed between you and Mr. ——— naturally gave a notoriety and formidable aſpect to our meeting, which it might not otherwiſe have poſſeſſed.

I have already obſerved, that we are the mark of calumny: it directs againſt us its moſt envenomed ſhafts. There are thoſe who do not bluſh to call us diſloyal ſubjects, and who aſſert, that, under the maſk of religion, we are endeavouring to deſtroy by violence the civil and eccleſiaſtical eſtabliſhments of our country. Excuſe me, Sir, if I remark, that you, poſſibly may be in the number of thoſe who have been deceived into a belief of ſuch aſſertions. Perhaps then, it was on

this ground, that you procured our exclusion from ——— meeting-house.

The fact, however, is, that our meeting as Unitarians, had no more connection with politics than with chemistry, with medicine, or with agriculture. I can assure you, Sir, if you need the assurance, that the object of our societies is purely religious. Neither the ravings of Burke *, nor the invectives of Horsley, nor the feeble declarations of their feeble imitators, will persuade impartial persons, that it is of a different kind. Concerning public bodies of men, you can only judge from their professions and their conduct; and it is the extreme of injustice to impute views and designs to them which they utterly disclaim.

"The Unitarians are bad and disaffected subjects." It is no presumption in favour of

* The debt of nature has now been paid by this celebrated man. Whatever his principles and his motives, it can scarcely be doubted but that he was a chief instigator of the war which is desolating and terrifying the continent of Europe. His eloquence, often grand and beautiful in the highest degree, was not seldom, however, a disorderly exhibition; and "the ravings" to which I refer, were, perhaps, the excesses of an overheated imagination wrought upon by an ungoverned sensibility.

this

this charge, that it proceeds from men who, being unable to controvert the truth of our religious ſentiments, attempt by theſe ſhameleſs accuſations to prevent their progreſs. It is no preſumption in its favour, that it comes from thoſe who have too well ſucceeded in expoſing us to the frowns of the court and the outrages of the mob. "The Unitarians are bad and diſaffected ſubjects." But what proof of this diſaffection has been adduced? Has it been made to appear, that they have diſobeyed the laws, or violated the tranquillity, of their country? Has it been heard, that they have burned the habitations, deſtroyed the property, inſulted the perſons, or threatened the lives, of their peaceful neighbours?

The Unitarians, it may be ſaid, nevertheleſs, *are enemies to the doctrines and the exiſtence of the eſtabliſhed church*. Some of its leading doctrines, indeed, are, in our judgment, groſs corruptions of Chriſtianity, and we conſider it as our duty to oppoſe them by every proper and honourable method. We have yet to learn, however, that this is a crime or a fault. Many of us too, I have no heſitation in avowing, are far from believing an alliance between church and

and ſtate to be really expedient or uſeful. This latter opinion, notwithſtanding, is by no means characteriſtic of us as Unitarians: it is maintained by the diſſenters at large, and by ſeveral who do not rank with diſſenters. But whatever be our ſentiments upon theſe ſubjects, "the weapons of our warfare," Sir, "are not carnal." Our cauſe neither requires nor allows the uſe of violence. This we have experienced, but never employed. We content ourſelves with combating by argument and diſcuſſion what we regard as error, and confide in time and increaſing knowledge for the prevalence of truth. It is our deſire to live in friendſhip with the wiſe and virtuous of every denomination; and we ſhould bluſh, could we imagine, that we were capable of diſturbing our brethren of the eſtabliſhment in the exerciſe of their worſhip.

Upon political meaſures and political events we cannot fail to reflect much as *individuals*. As *a body*, however, we have no other bond of union than our religious profeſſion. It would not be wonderful if the ſpirit of free inquiry which we cheriſh and recommend in examining ſubjects of theology,

ſhould carry us farther in our ſpeculations upon other points, than thoſe of our fellow-citizens to whom this ſpirit is unknown. I muſt acknowledge likewiſe, that the unmerited treatment which Unitarians have lately received, is not calculated to conciliate and ſooth them. Still, I can undertake to affirm, that we wiſh for no reform, no amendment, which is not alſo deſired by many of our neighbours; that, like them, we deprecate convulſion; and that there is nothing which we are ſo anxious to avert as violence and tumult. Let our bittereſt enemy prove, if he can, that our conduct in any inſtance has been inconſiſtent with our profeſſion. With regard to opinion, we have ever been accuſtomed to view it as the firſt privilege of Engliſhmen undauntedly to avow their ſentiments, whilſt they are obedient to the laws. In ſome former times, the ſilence upon political topics, which it is now ſo faſhionable to inculcate, would have been conſidered as inauſpicious to the very exiſtence of the liberties of Britain.

But Unitarians, I ſhall be told, *rejoiced in the French revolution.* And did Unitarians alone rejoice in it? Yet, after all, Sir, where

is

is the guilt? It is one thing to approve of the end; another to approve of the means. As Men, as Britons, I will add as Chriſtians and as Proteſtants, but not peculiarly as Unitarians, we exulted in the fair proſpect of increaſing felicity which then opened upon the world. We ſincerely lament, that an event ſo noble in itſelf, ſo glorious in its tendency, has ſince been tarniſhed by follies and by crimes. For the civil and religious liberties of mankind we feel a warm concern. It were unjuſt to ſuppoſe, that you, Sir, are a ſtranger to this generous emotion. But we are not more deſirous than yourſelf to accompliſh even the beſt object in an unlawful manner. We reflect with equal pain upon ſcenes of cruelty and death, whether republicans or monarchiſts be the actors. Such, indeed, are our habits of life, and ſuch our ſituation in ſociety, as to render the wiſh of employing violence the remoteſt from our thoughts; and government has leſs to dread from us than from its intereſted and ſervile admirers.

I will beg leave, Sir, to quote in this place ſome excellent remarks of Mr. Hall. They are contained in his maſterly anſwer to Mr. Clayton's

Clayton's ſermon; and his performance, full of vigour and eloquence, is well deſerving of your ſerious peruſal. As the author is not himſelf an Unitarian, his obſervations are hence entitled to greater attention.

"An Unitarian," ſays this ingenious writer, "is a perſon who believes Jeſus Chriſt had no exiſtence till he appeared on our earth, whilſt a Trinitarian maintains that he exiſted with the Father from all eternity. What poſſible connection can we diſcern between theſe opinions and the ſubject of government?" p. 56. —"As there is no foundation in the nature of things for imagining any alliance between heretical tenets and the principles of freedom, this notion is equally devoid of ſupport from fact or hiſtory. Were the Socinian ſentiments in particular productive of any peculiar impatience under the reſtraints of government, this effect could not fail of having made its appearance on their firſt riſe in Poland, while their influence was freſh and vigorous; but nothing of this nature occurs, nor was any ſuch reproach caſt upon them *. That ſect in

* I will embrace this opportunity of reminding my readers in general, that Unitarians diſclaim a leading article of *Socinianiſm*,

England which has always been moſt conſpicuous for the love of freedom have, for the moſt part, held ſentiments at the greateſt remove from Socinianiſm that can be imagined."—p. 59. "There are not wanting reaſons which, at firſt view, might induce us to conclude Unitarianiſm was leſs favourable to the love of freedom than almoſt any other ſyſtem of religious belief. If any party of Chriſtians were ever free from the leaſt tincture of enthuſiaſm, it is the Unitarian: yet that paſſion has, by every philoſopher, been judged friendly to liberty; and to its influence, though perhaps improperly, ſome of its moſt diſtinguiſhed exertions have been aſcribed. Every pretence for confounding the attachment to freedom with the ſentiments of a religious party, is moſt abundantly confuted both from reaſon and from fact."—p. 61.

It is not a little remarkable, Sir, that the charge of political diſaffection, ſo malignantly advanced againſt Unitarians, is but of recent

Socinianiſm, the worſhip of Jeſus Chriſt. *The Socinian ſentiments* had certainly *their firſt riſe in Poland: Unitarianiſm* was the faith of the Apoſtles and of the earlieſt Chriſtians.

date.

date. Formerly, it comprehended the diſſenters in general. It was reſerved for the ſagacity and holy zeal of a modern Sacheverell to diſcover, that in the principles of Unitarianiſm are contained more eſpecially the ſeeds of diſloyalty and rebellion. This was the laſt reſource of our "foiled polemic." In the cloſe of his controverſy with Dr. Prieſtley, he brought againſt that illuſtrious character an accuſation of this nature, which he never attempted to ſupport. Not long ſince, he preferred the ſame accuſation againſt the Unitarians at large; which *The Welch Freeholder* has ably ſhewn to be a groſs and ſhameleſs calumny*. Our eccleſiaſtical cruſader has ſubſtituted invective for argument, and has thus afforded a freſh triumph to his antagoniſts and to truth.

Truth, Sir, cannot be eſtabliſhed by ſlander and railing. She rejects the ſervices of Horſley, but cheerfully acknowledges her obligations to Prieſtley. Forgive me, that I here advert to this "great, injured name." He has left our country, it is true; but he has ſtill

* See his Farewell Epiſtles to the Biſhop of St. David's.

the

the ſtrongeſt claim upon our gratitude and eſteem. I conſider him at preſent ſolely as a divine. Although we "call no man maſter upon earth," yet muſt we own, that to his talents, his learning, his diligence and his zeal we are more indebted than we are capable of expreſſing. Few have done ſo much and ſo well in illuſtrating the evidences of our common Chriſtianity; ſcarcely any ſo much in defending and ſupporting our principles as Unitarians. No writer has ſhewn ſo ſucceſsfully, that theſe principles have the ſanction, not only of reaſon and of ſcripture, but of the remoteſt antiquity. In future times, therefore, when poſterity ſhall dwell with thankfulneſs, admiration and rapture upon the names of Wickliffe, Luther, and other celebrated champions of our religion, that of Prieſtley ſhall not be forgotten. We feel not the leſs attachment to him becauſe he has been perſecuted. They alone who are ignorant of his writings and his life can ſuppoſe, that he deſerved the treatment which he unhappily received. It is too common, Sir, even with thoſe from whom better things might be expected, to ſpeak of him as a dangerous political character. I would

would candidly believe, that of the perſons who make the aſſertion, many are unacquainted with his works. His publications on civil government are comparatively few. They relate chiefly to general topics, and contain little that is of a local or temporary nature, nothing that is hoſtile to peace, to liberty and to order. His manners are unuſually mild; his conduct the moſt exemplary and blameleſs. Why then was he thus the object of hatred, violence and inſult? Why was his reſidence amongſt us rendered hazardous and unſafe? Why, in his declining years, was he induced to exchange his native ſhores for a foreign land? It is not any thing ſtrange or new which has happened to him. His undaunted and efficacious labours in the cauſe of religious truth have diſpleaſed, irritated, enraged. Like the wiſeſt and beſt men of every age and nation, he has experienced calumny and ſuffering. Yet are we conſoled by the perſuaſion, that, if Providence continue his life and health, he will ſtill be eminently uſeful. The ſun which has ſet upon our iſland will enlighten and bleſs other regions. With reſpect to his deluded countrymen, we doubt not but that, whenever

the

the hour of reflection ſhall arrive, they will, as one man, be ſenſible of their loſs, bluſh for their behaviour, and ardently wiſh the return of this voluntary and memorable exile.

To proſcribe a particular claſs of men for their opinions, Sir, is a meaſure as deſtitute of policy as it is of juſtice. It is properly, indeed, perſecution; and perſecution is ultimately leſs injurious to the cauſe of the ſufferer, than to the intereſts of thoſe by whom it is employed. The effects which followed the revocation of the edict of Nantes * are well known, and furniſh an admirable leſſon to all governments. It is not wiſe to drive men of talents and virtue from a country, whatever be their ſentiments. Truth, if permitted to ſupport itſelf, will always have ſuch advantage over error, that no danger can be reaſonably dreaded from the moſt open declaration of *opinion*. *The conduct*, and the conduct *alone*, ſhould be amenable to the laws.

It is our earneſt wiſh, Sir, to live, if poſſible, in charity with all men. We only aſk from our neighbours that equity and candour which

* For the nature and conſequences of this event, ſee Voltaire's Hiſtory of the Age of Louis the Fourteenth, Chap. xxxii.

it

it is not leſs our inclination than our duty to exerciſe in return. Charge us not with diſaffection, until ample proof has been afforded of ſuch diſaffection. Say not, that our religious ſentiments are hoſtile to excellence of character and peace of mind, before you have produced ſufficient reaſons for the aſſertion. Such is the condition of man, ſuch the nature of the world, that no principles have their full efficacy upon the feelings and the conduct. Men likewiſe are generally diſpoſed to eſteem thoſe views of religion which themſelves entertain, as peculiarly favourable to virtue and happineſs: and the tendency of ſuch as are indulged by others, they too frequently regard in quite an oppoſite light. Nor are their ideas reſpecting moral worth, preciſely and univerſally the ſame. The queſtion will ever be determined by aſſociation and habit, and is addreſſed to the paſſions rather than the underſtandings of mankind. You will allow me, however, to obſerve, that the inferiority of Unitarian Chriſtians to their brethren, as to real goodneſs and mental ſatisfaction, is not and cannot be eſtabliſhed by facts. There are not wanting many amongſt them,

who

who demonſtrate, that their diſtinguiſhing tenets are in the higheſt degree practical, animating and conſolatory.

In concluſion, Sir, permit me once more to aſk you, why you prohibited us from meeting agreeably to our original intention? Hitherto, you have aſſigned no reaſon for your conduct; you have not openly imputed to us even a miſtake. The motives which influenced you can only be conjectured. It is thought by ſome, that you procured our excluſion from ——— meeting-houſe, merely through timidity and a diſhoneſt ſhame. You were afraid, they imagine, to countenance, even by implication, ſo unpopular a deſcription of men as Unitarians. But a man, a Chriſtian, ought not ſurely to be governed by timidity. This quality, Sir, "would have prevented the dawning of light at the Reformation, and tends to retard its progreſs toward perfect day *." Truth expects from us a different temper; and we muſt be prepared not only to act but to ſuffer in her cauſe.

* See an excellent ſermon preached before an aſſembly of Proteſtant diſſenting miniſters at Exeter, May 10, 1786, by Joſeph Bretland.

I can

I can hardly perſuade myſelf, that you really judged our meeting to be unneceſſary, inexpedient or dangerous. Neither will I take upon me to determine, whether, by the meaſure in queſtion, you courted the favour of the powerful and the great. In the preſent day, ſtrong are the temptations to temporize, and numerous thoſe who almoſt inſenſibly yield to the ſolicitation. But I would earneſtly hope, I am deſirous of believing, that this, Sir, is not your caſe. For no man conſults a dignity of character when he meanly ſubſerves the views of others, in contradiction to his better judgment.

If *the majority of the truſtees* for —— meeting-houſe deſigned by their late proceedings to injure our cauſe, let them know, Sir, that they have completely defeated their intentions. Their treatment of us has attracted a great degree of attention to our meaſures; in conſequence of which, I may venture to foretell, that the grand purpoſe of our ſociety will be conſiderably advanced.

It is our conſolation and our joy, indeed, that if, agreeably to our perſuaſion, the doctrines of Unitarian Chriſtians be the doctrines

of ſcripture, they will eventually prevail over all oppoſition. Whatever be the conduct or the fate of particular men, whatever the reſult of particular meaſures, *Truth* will triumph. Notwithſtanding that the number of thoſe who come forward in the public avowal of our principles be not large, yet theſe principles are ſecretly maintained by many who would have no heſitation in profeſſing them, were it not for conſiderations of preſent intereſt and comfort. The ſeed which is ſown cannot be loſt: it has already taken root and ſprings; though perhaps it may be reſerved for our diſtant poſterity to reap the harveſt.—I remain,

SIR,

Your humble ſervant,

JOHN KENTISH.

——, October 1794.

POST-

POSTSCRIPT.

PAINFUL as is the peruſal of eccleſiaſtical hiſtory, it affords inſtruction. I find, that the recent conduct of the gentleman to whom the above Letter is addreſſed, is not without a precedent—a precedent, however, which he can hardly approve. In the year 1719 a memorable controverſy took place at Exeter, reſpecting the Trinity. Amongſt thoſe who ſuffered for the denial of the doctrine were Mr. Hallett, *an anceſtor of* ———, and the celebrated Mr. James Peirce. The latter has recorded a fact which bears a ſtrong reſemblance to the late proceedings of *the majority of the truſtees for* ——— *meeting-houſe*. At the ſame time, his reaſoning upon it ſeems exceedingly juſt, and ſtrictly applicable to the caſe in queſtion. Part of what he has ſaid upon the ſubject is here tranſcribed, and is ſubmitted, without a comment, to the reflections of the reader.

" The next day, which was Friday, three of the four proprietors (*i. e.* truſtees) of the

meeting-houſe where Mr. Hallett and I uſed to preach, went in their own and the fourth's name, and took up the keys of the houſe."— "Let the world now judge. *The houſe was built at the common charge; the gentlemen were made proprietors only for form ſake, the law making it neceſſary the property ſhould be veſted in ſome perſons; and the greater the confidence was that was placed in them, the more intolerable was their oppreſſion when they betrayed their truſt.* 'Tis plain the people deſigned the houſe for their own uſe in the worſhip of God, and that it ſhould be at their diſpoſal. This was virtually owned by them as often as they left the people to the choice of a miniſter. If they who were diſſatisfied had withdrawn from us, and gone where they liked better; or if they had attempted to eject us by the votes of the people, we are too much friends to liberty to have troubled the world with ſuch a public complaint; but if theſe proprietors may rightfully ſhut the doors againſt whom the people chooſe, or (which is all one) may make themſelves the abſolute judges whom to admit, or whom to exclude, I can't ſee why the people ſhould ever more

be concerned in any choice at all. Theſe gentlemen have by this means the perpetual advowſon of the living; and if the people will bear ſuch an inſult upon their liberty and juſt right, there is an end of one principle the diſſenters have always pretended to hold. I think it becomes them, as ever they will ſhew themſelves friends to liberty, to proteſt againſt ſuch unjuſt and oppreſſive methods. I ſhall always ſuſpect the cauſe which the zealots can find in their hearts to ſupport by ſuch injuſtice *."

* Caſe of the Miniſters ejected at Exon. By James Peirce, one of them. London, 1719. p. 14. 17.

Printed by J. Davis, Chancery Lane.

Sold by J. JOHNSON, *in St. Paul's Church-yard*,

I. The MORAL TENDENCY of the GENUINE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE; a Diſcourſe written with reference to Mr. A. Fuller's Examination of the Calviniſtic and Socinian Syſtems. Second Edition.

II. STRICTURES upon the REPLY of Mr. FULLER to Mr. KENTISH's DISCOURSE.

5 0059